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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 DAMASCUS 000147

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [IR](#) [IS](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: ASAD TELLS CODEL BERMAN SYRIA READY FOR PEACE,  
U.S. INVOLVEMENT NECESSARY FOR SUCCESS

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b, d.

¶1. (C) Summary: President Asad's February 21 meeting with CODEL Berman focused on the need for frank dialogue between the two countries, U.S. concerns about Syria's relations with Hamas, Iran, and Hizballah, and Syria's desire for an American umbrella in a comprehensive regional peace process. Asad said Syria and the U.S. shared common interests in a secure and stable Iraq, real peace between Israel and its neighbors, and in the fight against terrorism. Chairman Berman stressed Asad had an opportunity to affect U.S. and Israeli public opinion positively through gestures that signaled Syria's interest in real peace. Berman praised Syria's establishment of diplomatic relations with Lebanon and said the U.S. looked forward to Syria's follow-up on its commitments to send an Ambassador and demarcate the border. Americans, he said, saw a contradiction between Hamas's publicly expressed desire for Israel's destruction and Syria's willingness to host the group's leadership while maintaining Syria's interest in peace. Berman argued Americans also viewed as hostile Syria's role in facilitating the flow of foreign fighters. Bashar said Syria had pushed Hamas to clarify its stance on peace with Israel and believed Hamas could reach a reconciliation agreement with the Palestinian Authority and adapt its position regarding peace with Israel under the right circumstances. Asad said Israel's Gaza incursion had disrupted indirect Israeli-Syrian peace talks, but Syria was ready to re-engage if the next Israeli government showed interest in resuming negotiations and the U.S. was ready to provide an umbrella. Asad dismissed U.S. concerns about human rights in Syria, saying the U.S. lacked credibility on this subject. Asad touched briefly on Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia, noting King Abdullah was a "good man" surrounded by corrupt advisors.  
End Summary

¶2. (C) Congressman Howard Berman, accompanied by Charge, HFAC Chief of Staff Alan Makovsky, and Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker), met February 21 for 90 minutes with President Asad, who was flanked by FM Walid Muallim, Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban, and Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Moustafa. This was Berman's first meeting with Asad.

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How to Re-Engage  
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¶3. (C) Asad opened by emphasizing the importance of frank and candid dialogue without preconditions. There were positive and negative issues between the U.S. and Syria that

would require frequent discussions at short intervals. The development of better relations would require some complementarity, but not identical overlap between the two countries. Syria could help inform the United States about the regional challenges involved in peace discussions and fighting extremism and terrorism. In the Middle East, Asad continued, one could not talk about a comprehensive peace without considering all the factors, including Israeli conflicts with Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, in addition to the conflict in Iraq. "We have to be able to move in parallel," Asad suggested, even while each problem posed different challenges and affected different interests. It was impossible to solve one problem without considering how they all overlapped, said Asad.

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Asad: Need Comprehensive Approach to Regional Issues  
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¶4. (C) Berman noted the Syrian President's analysis contradicted those who said that peace agreements between Israel and the Palestinians and Syria and Israel would solve all the region's major problems, including terrorism. The reality was far more complicated, he said. Asad replied that terrorists were working to influence other issues; for example, Bin Laden had claimed the Palestinian issue as justification for al Qaeda's existence when he had no ties to Palestinians whatsoever. Yet people in the region had naively believed him. The point, Asad suggested, was that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict would require progress on many fronts.

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¶5. (C) Berman asked whether a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians was necessary for peace between Syria and Israel. Asad stressed the need to distinguish between real peace and a peace treaty. It might be possible for Syria to sign a peace agreement with Israel, but a bilateral accord would not address the 400,000 Palestinian refugees living in Syria. Even if Israel opened an embassy in Damascus, Asad continued, there would not be real peace until both sides resolved a wide range of local and regional issues. A peace agreement represented a necessary beginning but did not meet all the necessary conditions for peace, emphasized Asad. Berman replied this discussion was akin to which came first, the chicken or the egg? Berman stressed the U.S. and Syria seemed to share the same objectives in pursuing peace, but wondered whether the U.S. and Syria could agree on how to solve any problems if it were necessary to solve them all at once.

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U.S. Role is Key  
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¶6. (C) Asad contended a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty would be the first necessary step, but this agreement would prove durable only if there was a "shared vision of peace." Egypt and Jordan both had peace treaties with Israel, he said, but it was difficult to argue there was real peace. Berman asked Asad to describe his vision of peace. Bashar responded there had to be an environment conducive to a robust process. There had been some U.S. efforts in the region in 2008, but they were inconsistent and limited to the process only. It was important to have the U.S. play the role of arbiter and guarantor, but the U.S. must come to this role based on an assessment of its interests. Syrian and U.S. interests overlapped a great deal (70-to-80 percent, claimed Asad), but the devil was in the details. Syria and the U.S. shared an interest in fighting terrorism, achieving peace, and seeing a unified Iraq. It would be necessary for the two countries to continue their dialogue to identify each government's preferred approach, identify issues that required resolution,

and find ways to coordinate.

17. (C) Syria saw the U.S. role as key, Asad reiterated. U.S. involvement could have made a difference in Syria's indirect peace talks with Israel, as both sides were close to moving to direct talks. The U.S. role would be essential to establishing a diplomatic umbrella to achieve a deal and arrangements to ensure its implementation, Asad said adamantly. But first it would be necessary for the U.S. and Syria to invest in a bilateral dialogue to lay the groundwork for such an endeavor. Berman said he agreed with the need for dialogue but worried that talking would become a substitute for real problem solving in the region. We can review the "headlines" for the main subjects to discuss and stop the dialogue if we cannot reach agreement, Asad answered. If both sides want to continue, they can.

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Berman: Time For a Grand Syrian Gesture?  
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18. (C) Berman observed the lack of dialogue between the two countries for the last eight years had not changed the substance of the issues facing them. "There are a series of issues, and we know them well," he said. It was fair to say the previous U.S. administration had applied a strategy of sanctions and isolation, but there had been no real progress in confronting the problems in the region. So long as re-starting U.S.-Syrian dialogue led to problem solving, "I'm for it," Berman said. But there should not be dialogue just for the sake of talking. President Obama had made a clear commitment to engaging the Middle East and establishing a process; he had appointed Special Envoy George Mitchell and dispatched him to the region immediately after taking office.

There was now a quick policy review which was necessary to help establish clear and achievable objectives. As Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Berman said he represented a separate branch of government. He would go back to Washington for discussions with the Administration and hoped to see a policy change. But, continued Berman,

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many Americans viewed SARG policies as contrary to U.S. interests, and this perception was not just that of the previous Administration. Syria could help by making a positive and unmistakable gesture, as it did when it turned over PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan to Turkey in 1998. That decision, Burman explained, had led to a decade of positive relations between the two countries and had advanced Syria's interests in the region.

19. (C) Turkey was not occupying Syrian land, replied Asad, so making a gesture in that context was possible. Though Turkey had engineered a fraudulent election to regain the province of Iskenderun, the circumstances were different from Israeli occupation of the Golan. Returning to U.S.-Syrian relations, Asad said the U.S. government system was complex and many lacked an understanding of how U.S. policies were formulated. The most important priority for deciding what actions the U.S. and Syria might undertake together was to reach an eye-to-eye understanding on their mutual interests. Berman agreed, saying President Asad sounded like an American when he expressed Syria's interest in a stable and unified Iraq. At the same time, Americans cared about the threat their soldiers faced from foreign fighters entering Iraq from Syria and wanted to see if more could be done to stop this flow. Berman said his personal view was that Syria's establishment of diplomatic relations with Lebanon had been very positive. The U.S. wanted to see more progress and looked forward to Syria's fulfillment of its commitments to send an ambassador to Beirut and delineate Syria's borders with Lebanon.

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Iran

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¶10. (C) Berman shifted to U.S. concerns regarding Iran, saying there was bi-partisan agreement that Iran should not be allowed to develop and deploy nuclear weapons. Berman said whatever one's views about Israel's nuclear program, it was hard to argue credibly that regional stability would be enhanced by an Iranian nuclear weapons capability. A lot of U.S. policy would flow from this premise, and many Americans were not sure that Syria shared the same view. Bashar expressed Syria's opposition to any new nuclear weapons states in the region, referring Berman to Syria's draft UNSCR on a nuclear weapons free zone for the Middle East. Asad said there was a P5 1 process with Iran that was flawed because it sought to negate Iran's right as an NPT signatory to pursue a civilian nuclear program. Suspending Iran's program as a condition for engaging in direct negotiations with it was in fact a violation of NPT principles, Asad maintained. Iran did not have a problem addressing issues in the IAEA, but it did have an issue with UN Security Council sanctions. Berman replied that he agreed Iran's suspension of its enrichment program should not be a condition for dialogue with it, because such an approach clearly had not convinced Iran to cease its enrichment activities. However, Iran's nuclear program remained a deep source of concern for the American people, he said.

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Hamas

¶11. (C) Turning to Hamas, Berman said Americans in general were deeply committed to Israel's survival and security. As an American Jew, Berman said he firmly supported a Jewish homeland that was democratic. He added that Israel's occupation of Arab lands might one day lead to a Palestinian majority under Israeli control. Hamas, he said, remained committed to Israel's destruction. Though certain Hamas officials had discussed the possibility of a Palestinian state reached in phases and stages, Hamas had yet to come to terms with Israel as a permanent reality in the region. Syria defended Hamas as a legitimate resistance group and hosted its leadership while Iran provided financial support. The U.S. had designated Hamas as a terrorist organization because its goal was to destroy Israel. Until it was clear that Hamas had changed its position, what kind of peace would be possible, particularly given Syria's important relationship in hosting and defending Hamas? asked Berman.

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¶12. (C) Asad replied he understood Berman's commitment to Israel. Syria had lived 60 years in conflict with the reality of Israel and now believed peace was the best option. Hamas originated as a Palestinian off-shoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, a group with which the Syrian Government fought during the 1980s. Hamas used to seek Israel's destruction, Asad continued, but the "picture needs expanding." Hamas leader Khaled Mesha'al had announced "three years ago" Hamas could accept a two state solution; this was tantamount to recognizing Israel "indirectly." Mesha'al also said in 2008 Hamas would accept a peace agreement if the Palestinian people supported it in a referendum, Asad argued. "You have to deal with reality," Asad said. "We host Hamas, yes. But Hamas won the (2006 Palestinian) elections and we have to work with it to change its ideology." Asad reiterated that Hamas's religious ideology still "came from God," but he said that the group's position had changed. Syria dealt with Hamas because it had no choice. "If you want peace, then why Hamas? Because without them, it won't work," he said. Syria had pushed the Hamas leadership in the last several weeks to define its position on a peace agreement with Israel. "They said yes," to the idea of accepting a two-state solution, Asad claimed, arguing this position had support at the grass

roots level. "If we move to peace, they will too. If not, they will fall (from power)," Asad said. Fatah was losing support because the Palestinian people opposed its policies.

¶13. (C) Berman told Asad Syria could be helpful if Hamas was ready for peace. Neither the U.S. nor Israel sensed a the kind of shift Asad was talking about. Asad replied Syria could definitely play a role, but the U.S. needed to do its part. Syria had worked hard to "bring Hamas along," but it needed the U.S. to act constructively. Syria did not expect the U.S. or Israel to deal directly with Hamas for now, but the Europeans were doing so. Asad likened Hamas to the PLO prior to U.S. willingness to deal with it. Berman replied the PLO was a terrorist organization when he arrived in Congress and U.S. policy changed only after the PLO changed its policy. Bashar argued Hamas would be more flexible in its views the more governments dealt with it. Not dealing with it would ultimately fail and might prompt Hamas leaders to walk back their views. The issue facing the new administration was how it defined its position toward the "new peace." There was a window of opportunity now that would not stay open forever. The region faced a new generation that was increasingly vulnerable to extremists and it was time to make up for missed opportunities.

¶14. (C) In an aside, Berman noted that he had visited the Syrian National Museum and been surprised to see a cartoon exhibit on Gaza inside the front lobby. The cartoons went beyond attacking Israel and evoked anti-Semitic themes that usually were reserved for the worst of the Arab press. Asad said the exhibit reflected the public's mood and how hard the region had been hit by the Gaza crisis. "But it (the exhibit) doesn't matter if we move toward peace," argued Asad, who contended public opinion needed a release. "But you have a responsibility to shape public opinion," Berman shot back. Asad said the public's feelings were real, noting "I was affected by the Gaza footage. This is a normal reaction." Again, he reiterated, reviving a viable peace process would re-focus the public's attention, and it was important to seize the initiative now.

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Brief Exchange on Human Rights  
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¶15. (C) Berman replied that reaching U.S. and Israeli public opinion was also important, and one would always find Americans defending basic decency and human rights, regardless of whether bilateral relations with a given country are up or down. The U.S. enjoyed close relations with Egypt but nonetheless made human rights a priority. "The U.S. can't speak with credibility as long as you occupy Iraq and continue to operate Guantanamo," argued Asad.

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Iraq

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¶16. (C) Berman replied Obama had announced GTMO's closure and had signed a SOFA to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq. The U.S. people understood the credibility gap inherent in the previous administration's policies and had voted to change it. Obama campaigned on the necessity of withdrawing from Iraq, and the SOFA was the pathway to achieving this objective. "It's not enough to say 'we'll do it,'" Asad replied without any indication of irony. Occupation was occupation. The U.S. had to leave Iraq, but how it did so was more important. The political process had moved forward, but the country remained "on the brink of civil war." A disintegrated Iraq would affect the region and the world "for another 400 years." The U.S. needed to use its influence to



support a "real political process" that started with a national reconciliation conference and included all Iraqi elements except those aligned with al Qaeda. "Maliki is better than Saddam," Asad conceded, but he needs to extend a hand to all Iraqis, including former regime elements. "End de-Baathification once and for all," he urged. Such a process would be complicated and would require the U.S. to coordinate with international organizations, regional powers, and other players. "This doesn't mean you have to be humiliated," he added. Iraq wants its sovereignty and will thank the U.S. for getting rid of Saddam if the political process becomes more inclusive. Asad agreed with Berman that things were moving in a positive direction but warned that it could "get much worse." Al Qaeda was weak but could revive and mount a surge. "There are sleeper cells everywhere, including in Syria," he said.

¶17. (C) Berman replied that Iraq represented a potentially fruitful collaboration between Syria and the U.S. Asad agreed, noting that a security liaison had worked to both countries' benefit, "without us always seeing eye-to-eye," until 2004. This liaison had "failed because of the mistake you made in invading Iraq," Asad maintained. Berman noted the U.S. viewed Syria's position with suspicion because al Qaeda was entering Iraq through Syria, and it appeared as though Syria was helping them. In response, Bashar likened terrorists to scorpions. They were impossible "to put in one's pocket or use as a card" without getting stung. The terrorists, mostly Saudis, crossed into Iraq from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Syria, but the U.S. focused on those coming from Syria. Syria had quietly been fighting them inside its borders, but there were many sleeper cells, he warned. The September 2008 attack against a Syrian security force facility was only one example of how such groups would operate and were reacting to Syria's efforts to clamp down on their operations.

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Saudi-Syrian Relations  
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¶18. (C) Berman asked Asad whether reports about Syrian-Saudi reconciliation were accurate. "The King is a good man," replied Asad, "but others in the family are corrupt and extremists." Asad faulted the influence of the Wahhabi tribe for exporting an extremism that was at odds with Syria's secular society. The Saudis now better understood the bad influence of the Wahabis, but "it's too late," argued Asad. Just as Jordan's King Hussein supported the Muslim Brotherhood that had "returned to Jordan and threatened the regime," the extremists in Saudi Arabia were now a threat to Saudi rulers. Nonetheless, Syria was working to improve relations with Saudi Arabia and would deal with political realities. "This is how we succeed," Asad concluded.

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Comment  
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¶19. (C) FM Muallim, Ambassador Moustafa, and Bouthaina Shaaban were visibly relieved to hear Berman express his interest in "a problem solving approach," as opposed to the more direct line of discussion taken by CODEL Cardin members a few days earlier. When Berman remarked to Asad, "You could have been an American talking when you said we shared an interest in a unified, stable Iraq," Bouthaina whispered

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"yes" under her breath and Ambassador Moustafa nodded vigorously and was then more able to control his fidgeting. Still, Berman's softer tone did not gloss over the substantive differences between the U.S. and Syria. The Congressman's push for solid Syrian gestures to influence American and Israeli public opinion took the conversation in

a direction different from what we have seen between Asad and other CODELs. To be sure, Asad demonstrated little willingness to make any commitments or respond with anything other than increasingly familiar bromides, platitudes, and international relations jargon. But Asad's remarks on Syria's efforts to probe Hamas regarding Palestinian reconciliation and eventual participation in peace talks suggest an evolution in Syrian thinking about the relationship between the Palestinian and Golan tracks that is worth pursuing. Asad's preference to pursue both tracks under a U.S. umbrella and his acknowledgment that peace agreements won't solve everything suggests that Syria's behavior toward Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestinian issues will depend to a great extent on whether and how the U.S. engages on the Golan and Palestinian tracks.

¶20. (SBU) CODEL Berman did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.  
CONNELLY